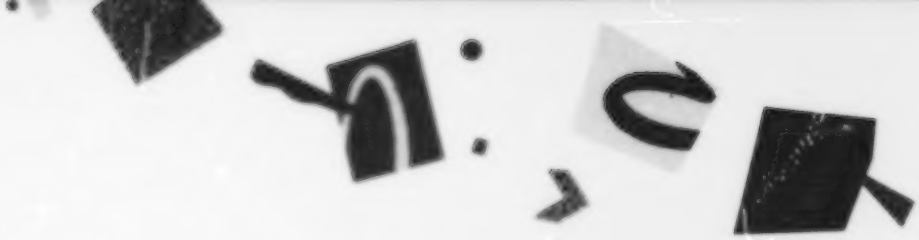

CELEBRATING

ALBERTAS
FAMILIES

Study paper prepared for
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Celebrating Alberta's Families

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Families and the Education System

The judgements and opinions reflected in this paper are solely the views of the author and do not necessarily represent the position of the Alberta Government.

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Alberta
GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA

Abstract

Today Canadian families have more vocational choice, represent more cultural and racial diversity, and model a greater variety of lifestyles than ever before in history. These families rely on the school to help them prepare children to live and work in a high tech, increasingly global society with multicultural and multi-racial citizens. The majority of parents work outside the home. Children begin school at an earlier age and stay longer.

What are the implications of all these changes on the school/home connection? The paper uses recent data from Alberta Education documents on Major Educational Trends, 1988, to look at the current situation.

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Any serious study of the relationship of schools and families today would be incomplete without an overview of changes occurring in the family and current trends in education. This paper will review some of the key changes taking place in families; some major educational trends which are changing the role of schools; and the implications of all these changes for the school/family connection and education in general.

The Changing Family

Families are undergoing considerable change; they are smaller yet more complex and have taken on more diverse forms than ever before. Today, families can mean: family of origin, blended, remarried, single parent, multi-generational, extended as well as families without children. A smaller proportion of our population bearing fewer children will result in even smaller families in the future.

"Families are primarily responsible for teaching ethics, values and society's behavioral norms...(and) for their children's physical and mental health...No other institution can effectively replace this important role parents have in preparing the next generation."

Families are responsible for teaching children useful life skills so they can live in the community and eventually contribute to the economy. Parents are expected to manage their children and ensure their education. Families are primarily responsible for teaching ethics, values and society's behavioral norms. They are also responsible for their children's physical and mental health. Families do this important work with children on behalf of society. No other institution can effectively replace this important role that parents have in preparing the next generation. Within this context, what then is the role of the school and how is it changing? According to 1984 Gallup Poll, the majority of adult Albertans surveyed ranked the purpose of education as follows:

1. associating acquired knowledge with the work world: (67%)
2. ethical and spiritual values; (60%)
3. the ability to get along with people of varying backgrounds; (56%)
4. understanding and responding to changing conditions; (49%)
5. an appreciation of tradition. (20%)

There is considerable overlap between responsibilities generally attributed to the family and the purposes identified as expectations of schools. If indeed families are expected to raise law-abiding citizens who are hand-working and congenial, then the education system is designed to support and further those goals. B.F. Skinner, a noted psychologist, writing in the New Scientist in 1984 said: "Education is what survives after what has been learned has been forgotten." In this definition of education, it is clear that both the family and the school form an important partnership in producing educated people. However, there are indications that the relationship between the home and the school is changing.

How has the school/family contract changed? Alan Toffler's concept of the Third Wave might help us. During the agricultural era, the majority of people lived and worked on farms or in supporting trades or services. Children were part of this economic enterprise. The need for schooling was secondary to the need for labor. Children attended school to learn the basic skills of reading, writing and understanding numbers.

School became more important during the industrial era when the requirement for more work skills and knowledge increased with the demands of industry. Families were expected to provide the "proper" upbringing and schools were expected to give children work skills and knowledge to fit the societal changes. At the height of the industrial era, one person working outside the home could support a spouse whose major responsibilities consisted of maintaining the household and attending to child care responsibilities. Generally the father and the children left the home daily and the mother worked at home. Also, with families moving off the farm, the society became more urban. Electronic servants, disposable products and easy-care fabrics radically changed the chores in the home. However, Canadian society still appeared fairly homogeneous racially, culturally and in terms of basic values held.

"During the agricultural era...the need for schooling was secondary to the need for labor. Children attended school to learn the basic skills of reading, writing and understanding numbers."

"...during the industrial era...Families were expected to provide the 'proper' upbringing and schools were expected to give children work skills and knowledge to fit the societal changes."

"Today...Canadian families are confronted with more vocational choices, more value conflicts and a variety of lifestyles. The explosion of electronic media...has influenced the way that families live, the values to which they are exposed and the immediacy of information."

Today, as we are shifting from the industrial society to the 'information era', Canadian families are confronted with more vocational choices, more value conflicts and a variety of lifestyles. The explosion of electronic media - transistor radios, televisions, computer games, cassette players, CD's, and VCR's, has influenced the way that families live, the values to which they are exposed and the immediacy of information. Families look to the schools to prepare children to live and work in this high tech, increasingly global society with multicultural, multiracial, multilingual citizens. Further, families are asking the schools to play a major role in helping to deal with current social issues like drug abuse, teen pregnancy, domestic violence and values clarification. Also, with the majority of parents working outside of the home for economic or other reasons, children are going to school at an earlier age and staying longer.

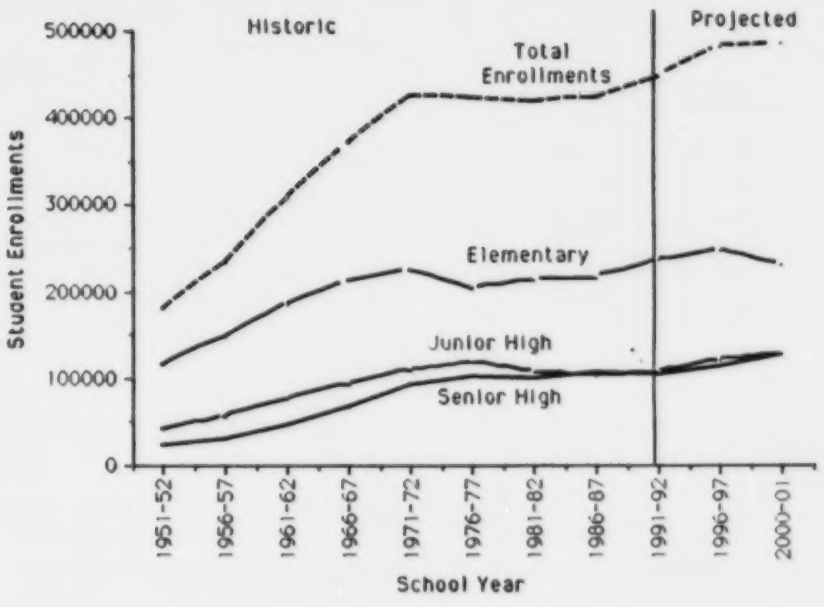
Alberta Education recently published two documents - one on major educational trends and the other on major societal trends. The information outlined in the following sections draws on both of these documents but in particular the educational trends, as well as on input by officials in the Department of Education. The section on trends highlights changes in student enrolment, programs and courses, student achievement, early school leavers, teachers, special education and other areas of interest. At the same time the paper looks at potential implications on the role of the school and the family.

Educational Trends

Student Enrolment

Student enrolment has increased, especially in the junior and senior high level. As of September 1988, there were 430,725 students in public and separate schools. Fifty-two percent of those were in elementary schools; close to 24 percent were in junior high and just over 24 percent were in senior high schools.

Figure 1: Actual and Projected Enrollments in Grades 1-12 (Public and Separate), 1951/52-2000/01

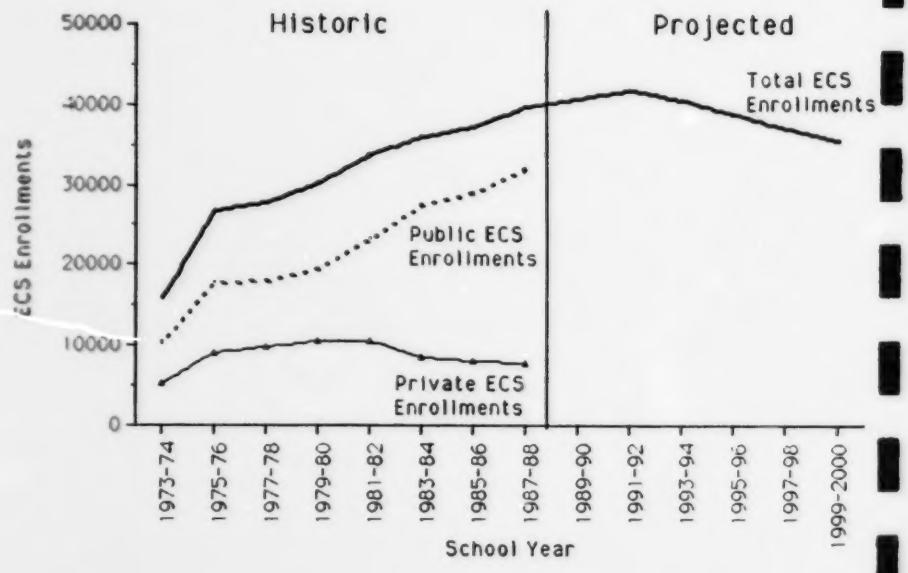


Note: Projections are based on medium population growth scenario.

"...enrollment in Early Childhood Education (ECS) is expected to decline."

The three to five year old population in Alberta, which had been increasing since the early 1970's is expected to decline after 1991. Consequently, enrollment in Early Childhood Education (ECS) is expected to decline. Growth will occur primarily in the publicly-operated ECS programs.

Figure 2: Actual and Projected Early Childhood Services Enrollments (Public/ Separate/Private), 1973/74 - 1999/2000

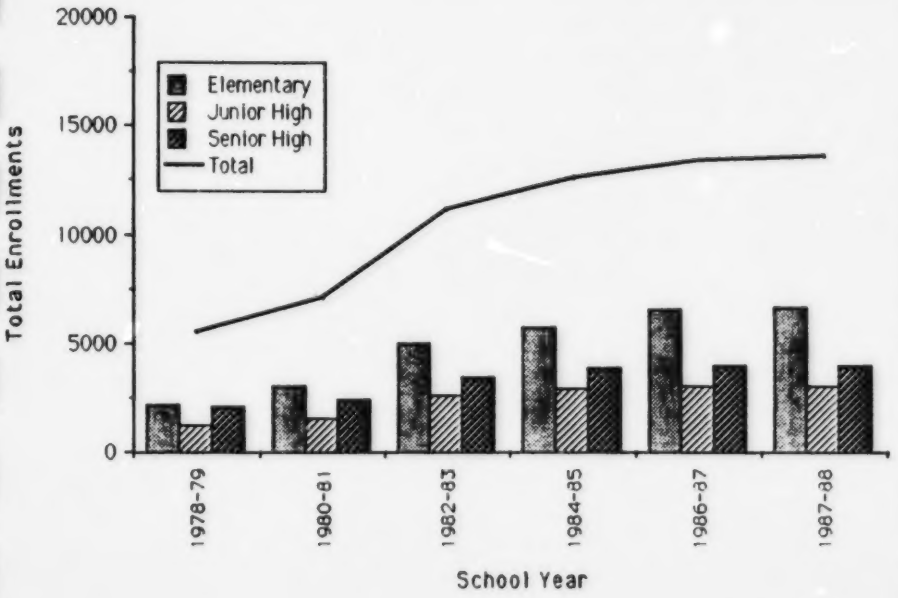


Note: Projections are based on medium population growth scenario. Projections include public/separate/private ECS enrollments.

"Families today can choose to send their children to public, separate or private schools."

Private school enrolments have increased in the past ten years from just over one percent to over three percent of the student population. The number of private schools more than doubled in the same period of time (from 60 in 1977 to 134 in 1988). This is not expected to change much in the future. What is important to notice here is the whole areas of choice in schooling available now. Families today can choose to send their children to public, separate or private schools. Choices are also enhanced by the opening up of boundaries by some school jurisdictions to allow parents and children to choose a particular school or program.

Figure 3: Private School Enrollments* (Grades 1-12), 1978/89 - 1987/88



Note: *Excludes Lloydminster and Category 3 Private Schools

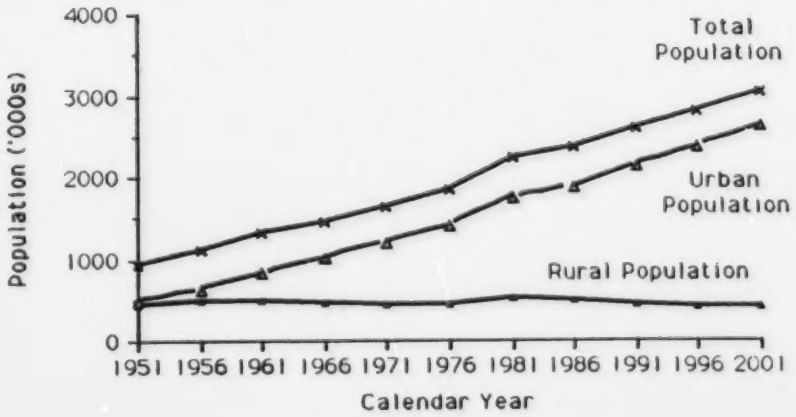
The number of students taking courses through the Alberta Correspondence School has increased by 20 percent in the past five years. High school students are taking courses that are unavailable to them locally while a hefty 58 percent are non-school or adult learners upgrading or competing basic education. Has the recession caused more people to seek higher qualifications and more transferable job skills so that they are more employable? If so, this is a helpful trend, considering that the information era requires more flexible workers, capable of using new technologies.

"Has the recession caused more people to seek higher qualifications and more transferable job skills so that they are more employable?"

The high incidence of adults returning via correspondence or continuing education courses is itself a reflection of the information age. There appears to be an increasing desire to gain more information and more knowledge. Life long learning is becoming more popular. One study predicted that by the year 2000, 95 percent of jobs will be related to information - handling it, manipulating it, processing it. There is no escaping the current reality that a diploma or a certificate is needed to get employment. This may be the reality that is sending people back to school.

"There is no escaping the current reality that a diploma or a certificate is needed to get employment. This may be the reality that is sending people back to school."

Figure 4: Rural-Urban population Distribution, Alberta, 1951-2001

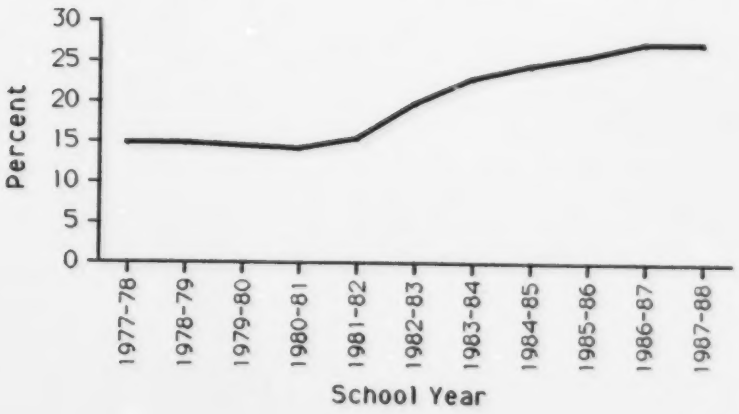


The most significant growth in school enrolment in the past 30 years in Alberta has been in the urban population. The rural population has not declined but indeed has remained stable although it has aged. In 1961, 48 percent of Albertans lived in rural areas. By 1986, 79.4 percent lived in urban areas. By the turn of the century less than 15 percent of our population will live in rural areas. It is the tremendous growth in urban areas that drive the change in the rural-urban ratios. The rapid growth of urban areas along with the declining birth rates and a stable rural population are causing a decline in the student population in rural

school jurisdictions. This decline ranges from 6 to 43 percent depending on the area. Rural schools are increasingly challenged to provide quality education in small communities with limited resources. Attracting teachers to serve these communities as well as providing a broad range of subjects for isolated student populations becomes more difficult. However, with the availability of technology, a student in Vulcan can access extensive data sources, communicate with people in Russia or Japan and obtain instructions from experts in a range of subject areas. Computers in the classrooms can bring education to everyone, everywhere, potentially reducing the concerns brought about by distance from urban areas.

"Rural schools are increasingly challenged to provide quality education in small communities with limited resources."

Figure 5: Percentage of Grade Twelve Students Over the Age of 17



Another striking change in enrolment patterns has been the number of older students returning to high school to upgrade or complete their qualifications. Three factors that seem to be contributing to this trend are: students taking longer than three years to complete high school; a slow economic recovery that has led to a more competitive job market and high youth unemployment. Students who might have left school during better economic times are currently remaining in school to graduate.

Also, universities continue to raise the level of achievement necessary for entrance. Now that post-secondary training is more and more necessary for good employment opportunities, more students are enrolling in programs that will give them access to further education.

"The significant changes in enrolment indicate that both the family and the school are dealing with a changing scene. Increasingly, we are becoming an urban-based people, needing more education in order to obtain work."

The significant changes in enrolment indicate that both the family and the school are dealing with a changing scene. Increasingly, we are becoming an urban-based people, needing more education in order to obtain work. It appears that young people are staying at home with their families longer. This extended adolescent phase is stressful for some families and consequently stressful on school administrations. Why? Parents who are both working to support the family, or single parents, are finding it more difficult to volunteer time to assist the school to the extent they once did. Parent-teacher interviews are more difficult to arrange. Complexities are introduced like multiple parenting arrangements created through separation, divorce and remarriage. The parents' role as tutors in their child's education is also made more difficult because of parents' work schedules. Also, the family's time together has been lessened with so many high school students working part-time. Added to that conundrum is the sophisticated equipment to which children have access at school which parents may not understand. Children are computer-literate and knowledge is changing rapidly. The day when parents could help children with their homework is passing. As one parent said: "I majored in physics as an undergraduate. Now its changed so much I can't help my son in Grade 12."

Programs and Courses

Diversity is the key word in the programs and courses offered in schools today.

A growing demand for French Immersion and Second language programs is apparent. The Immersion program has grown by 217 percent in the past ten years. This coincides with a general trend across Canada towards bilingualism. The University of Alberta will not admit students to its Faculty of Arts without matriculation in a second language.

"A growing demand for French Immersion and Second language programs is apparent...This coincides with a general trend across Canada towards bilingualism."

English as a Second Language (ESL) programs continue to be in high demand. The Calgary Separate School Board has identified immigrant students from close to 40 countries in its school system.

More students today are taking academic rather than vocational courses. The variety of courses available has grown from 75 in 1974 to 207 in 1986. Does this signify that we are trying to prepare students for a very different work force, or a more complex society? The content of courses has also changed considerably as a result of the information explosion and changing technology.

Innovation in program and course distribution in Alberta was highlighted by two pilot projects in distance education. These projects delivered courses to students in rural or isolated communities in the far south and north of the province. Students were able to access courses that they would be unable to take ordinarily in their location because of cost and availability. So far the first project has more than doubled, with 28 schools participating and over 1000 students involved. In 1987, 106 courses were offered in areas where formerly only 32 could have been offered without the project.

"More students today are taking academic rather than vocational courses...as a result of the information explosion and changing technology."

Most people are unaware of the extent to which course content has changed. A Gallup Poll done in Alberta in 1988 discovered that 58 percent of people had not had children in school in Alberta in the past 10 years. Their perception is that schools are still teaching the same things as were taught when they were in class twenty years ago. In one neighborhood in St. Albert, a survey done by the local school revealed that 50 percent of the children had access to a computer in the home. The chances of a child from a disadvantaged neighborhood having access to a computer at home are much less. Providing equal opportunity for all children no matter what their social or economic situation continues to be a challenge.

Alberta Career Development and Employment recently assessed the types of courses taken by young women students. Opportunities may be opening up in the work place, change may be coming in the boardrooms, but young people still sign up for the same courses as the last generation did. Young women represented less than 30 percent of students in senior mathematics, physics and computer processing. In 1986/87, more than 50 percent of women registered in 'traditional' subjects of business education, accounting, biology, basic business and law. On the vocational side, 90 percent of the students in dictatyping, office procedure, shorthand, typing and word processing were women. Also, 90 percent of the students in beauty culture and health services were female. Only two percent of the students in electronics, industrial education, welding and autobody were women. Passing on change of job opportunity and accessibility to the next generation requires a combination of awareness and desire. The role of the school and the home in career direction must be assessed within this context.

"Passing on change of job opportunity and accessibility to the next generation requires a combination of awareness and desire. The role of the school and the home in career direction must be assessed within this context."

A program called "Stepping Stones" is providing help for women to move into more nontraditional jobs. Female role models come into classrooms and talk about their work. Tradespeople, technologists and professionals demonstrate the diversity of career paths. Career and Life Management programs also focus on expanding students' views and breaking down stereotypes.

Student Achievement

Overall, trends indicate an increase in higher education and a larger proportion of the general population having school diplomas. Yet public opinion polls usually show that at any given time there is a perception that standards of school performance are declining.

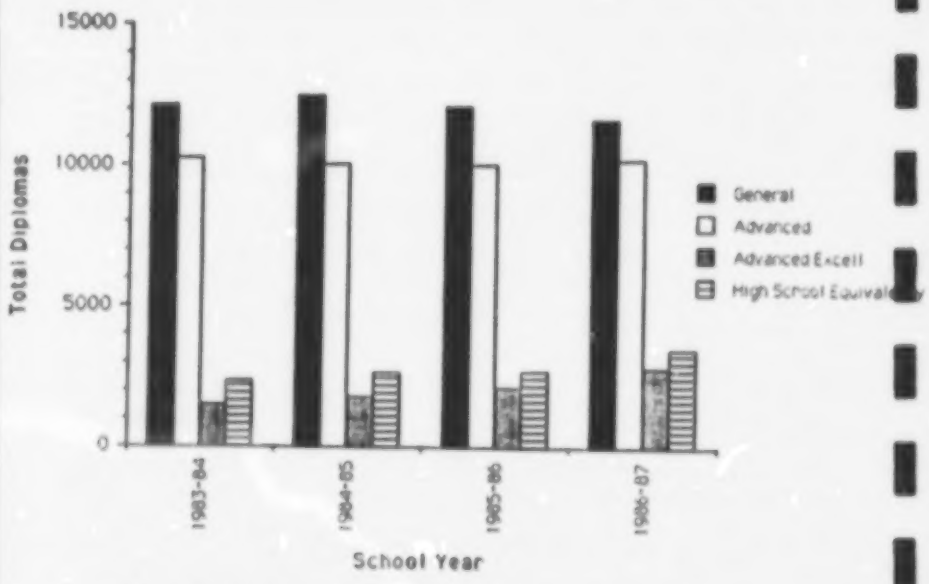
A 1986 Reid Poll found that Albertans were significantly more impressed with the quality of education than the national average. The national results showed that in 1986 only 42 percent felt that education was better than 25 years ago, while almost an equal number felt it was worse. Alberta results showed that 53 percent of Albertans felt education was better than in 1961.

A 1988 Gallup Poll found that 61 percent of Albertans who felt they had information about Alberta's educational system said they were satisfied with the quality of education in Alberta.

As mentioned in both the enrolment and courses segment of the paper, more students are completing their education and being granted diplomas, an increase of nine percent in the past 10 years. Several factors contribute to this. The percentage of 19 year olds holding diplomas rose by 11 percent during the 1978 to 1987 period inspite of a reduction in the number of students by 14 percent. More older students received diplomas in public and private schools, vocational schools, post-secondary institutions and by correspondence. In fact, the proportion of diplomas awarded to older students has increased from 4 percent to 17 percent in the last 10 years. Schools today are encouraging older students to return. Access for them is much easier than it was in the past.

"Overall, trends indicate an increase in higher education and a larger proportion of the general population having school diplomas. Yet public opinion polls usually show that at any given time there is a perception that standards of school performance are declining."

Figure 6: Distribution of Types of Diplomas Awarded



Note: Includes diplomas awarded to students who have upgraded their previous or original diplomas.

"As Alberta recovers from the economic downturn and prepares for the new demands of a diversified economy with more jobs in service and information and less in resources and industry, individual Albertans, both young and old are preparing themselves to take more complex jobs and work in more technical positions by seeking better education."

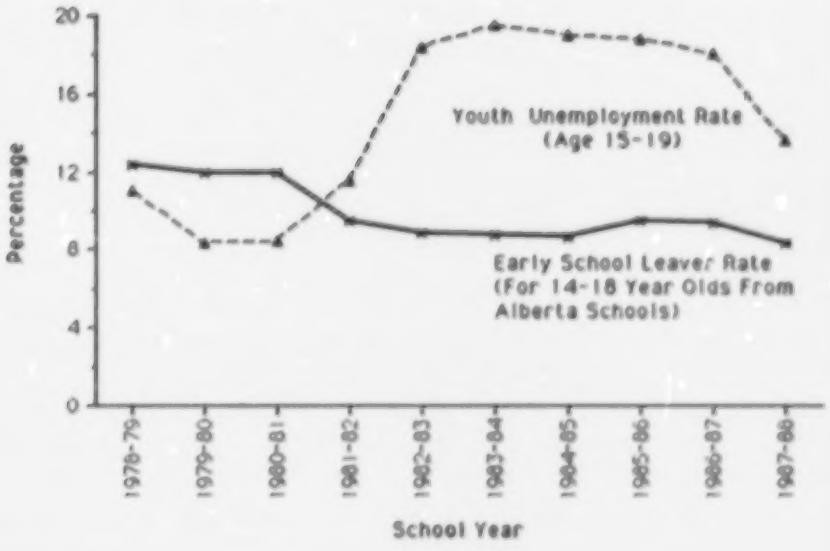
Finally, more students are seeking the type of diplomas that will allow them to enter post-secondary institutions.

As Alberta recovers from the economic downturn and prepares for the new demands of a diversified economy with more jobs in service and information and less in resources and industry, individual Albertans, both young and old are preparing themselves to take more complex jobs and work in more technical positions by seeking better education. Will the schools be able to keep up with the demand?

A recent review by Alberta Career Development and Employment confirmed that women still lag behind men in educational levels attained. In 1986, 55 percent of women had high school or less and less than 10 percent had a university degree. 12 percent of men held universities degrees and 49 percent had high school or less (Statistical Report: Women in the Alberta Labour Market, 1988).

Early School Leavers

Figure 7: Early Secondary School Leaver* Rate and Youth Unemployment Rate



Note: * Alberta Secondary School Age (14-18) Students

Happily, the number of early school leavers has declined. This may be caused by the economic slowdown as there are less jobs for the unskilled.

The literature on early school leavers strongly and constantly confirms the strong line between family background, school achievement and dropping out. The lure of the workplace is particularly strong for those students who are unsuccessful or alienated from school.

"The literature on early school leavers strongly and constantly confirms the strong line between family background, school achievement and dropping out."

In a study of 44,744 students aged 13 - 19, conducted in Ontario (The Adolescent Experience, 1986) Dr. Alan King identified five key elements that might contribute to student satisfaction in their school experience.

- effective teachers who are fair, accessible, caring and respectful of student individuality; enthusiastic and have clear, reasonable and consistently enforced expectations of student behaviour;
- a guidance counselling program which reduces student concerns about confidentiality and a perceived bias in favour of university bound students;
- effective school principals who treat students as individuals, administer rules fairly and are highly visible in the school;
- school programs which are limited to students' post-secondary futures;
- the involvement of the majority of students in extra curricular activities.

While students recognize the importance of school to their future employment, they yearn for closer relationships with teachers, more acceptance, less judging.

"No longer just a conveyor of knowledge, the teacher is called to be a facilitator of access to knowledge...to assist in the development of problem-solving, decision making, critical assessment and information access skills."

Teachers

Teachers are aging, with their average age in 1989 at 39.25. The average number of years of experience has risen to 13.33 years from 11.18 years in 1981-82. Average class size has declined from 30 students to 22 students over the past 30 years.

How have teachers' roles changed during that time? Both what is taught and how it is taught has changed. The teacher, as the font of all knowledge, is an image of the past. As previously noted, computerized classrooms with access to extensive data bases and other sophisticated forms of technology have called into question the fundamental role of the teacher. No longer just a conveyor of knowledge, the teacher is called to be a facilitator of access to knowledge. Increasingly, the teacher's role is to assist in the development of problem-solving, decision making, critical assessment and information access skills.

The change in teachers' roles is significant, yet parents' conception of their roles may not be changing as quickly. Moving from a "control" mindset to a "facilitator" mindset also requires a new orientation.

There is a public demand for accountability. In Alberta, 11 million dollars a day is spend on education. Parents and the public alike demand results from this expenditure. Accountability can be achieved through improved communication between the home and the school. With the changes described previously, both in the school and in the family, opportunities, let alone skills for successful dialogue are diminished.

Special Education

Recent changes to the School Act reflect changes in society's understanding of people with special needs. The whole program of integration of special needs students into the school system is so new that much still needs to be discussed and analyzed. There is no unanimity currently among parents, teachers or administrators about the integration of special needs students. There is much to be learned in this area. What support systems are necessary? As access to education is guaranteed under the new School Act, what effective measures should be implemented to respond to special needs? Because of medical and technological advances, more children with multiple handicaps are surviving, creating new challenges for families, communities and schools.

Partnerships in all aspects of education, become even more significant in these situations. It takes considerable cooperation to work out an effective program to meet the unique needs of each child. New ways of building cooperation and participation among all those involved are required.

"It takes considerable cooperation to work out an effective program to meet the unique needs of each child. New ways of building cooperation and participation among all those involved are required."

Other Areas of Interest

Home schooling is a small but growing option for parents. Changes to the School Act make it a right of parent to provide home schooling. Registered children are monitored by school principals or superintendent. Province wide, 600 to 1,000 students are registered as home students. With the new technologies and the dawn of the 'computer cottage', parents who are either concerned about the values their children are presented with by the school, or the quality of education provided by the system are entering the arena of home schooling.

The community school has modeled ways to create greater opportunities for integration and cooperation between the school and the community. Alberta has many pilot projects in this area. Many schools though technically not designated as community schools, nevertheless are taking up the community school philosophy and moving closer to their communities, offering community services and expanding opportunities for the school and the community to collaborate more closely.

"...the involvement of parents, while seen as crucial in planning the future of education, creates new challenges for everyone because of the additional demand on the resources and time of already burdened families."

Local Advisory Councils made up of parents and other stakeholders are another mechanism that is helping to create a climate for growing cooperation. At meetings of local advisory committees, teachers, administrators and occasional representatives from the Alberta Teachers' Association, deliberate over issues of concern to the education of their children. However, the involvement of parents, while seen as crucial in planning the future of education, creates new challenges for everyone because of the additional demand on the resources and time of already burdened families.

Many adults in the 1984 Gallup Poll (94%) felt that career counselling services should be provided in school. Over 92 percent felt secondary students should receive part of their schooling through practical experience in the work place. Educating a potential work force that is likely to change jobs, even career direction, several times during their worklife, creates additional challenges. There is a need to forge new liaisons between schools and the business community.

Some Additional Thoughts About School and Family Responsibilities

The relationships between the school, community agencies and the public and private sector are changing. Some schools are becoming multiple use facilities. Some schools in North America are open and used 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

What are the characteristics of a good school? Respondents to the 1988 Gallup Poll chose the following and rated them in this order.

Good schools provide:

- a safe and orderly environment (71%)
- regular measurement of learning and student reports (69%)
- rewards, praise and recognition for performance (62%)
- a climate where high expectations and high achievement are demanded (55%)

The core subjects taught in a good school were considered to be reading, spelling, writing, composition, grammar, computational skills, problem solving and Canadian history. Closely following were physical fitness, preventive drug education and geography.

Important problems that most adults felt existed in schools were: drug abuse (66%), peer pressure (50%), lack of discipline (45%), and lack of respect for others (teachers or other students) (45%).

Writing in Achieving Excellence In Our Schools, James Lewis Jr. maintains that an excellent school district is one in which all school people are helping students become something more than they ever hoped to be.

How much should the school do? Some persons, in light of the apparent breakdown of some of our social institutions, want the school to take more responsibility. There is a concern that too much responsibility is being placed on schools and, that this might potentially undermine the family's ability to take responsibility for itself.

"There is a concern that too much responsibility is being placed on schools and, that this might potentially undermine the family's ability to take responsibility for itself."

"...it is not the home that is the cause of some children's lack of success in school, but ...the lack of connection between home and school. When these two environments work closely together both the family and the school change and students thrive."

Hargreaves (1984) in his report on improving secondary schools, writes: "There is very little that the schools can do towards removing poverty or improving the adverse conditions in which many parents live. Yet, if we want children to achieve more, especially working class children, then improved home-school liaison and increased parental involvement must be a top priority."

The research of the effects of parent involvement on children's school achievement indicates that it is not the home that is the cause of some children's lack of success in school, but rather it is, in substantial part, the lack of connection between home and school. When these two environments work closely together both the family and the school change and students thrive.

The source of Figures 1 through 7 in this paper is Alberta Education Trends - 1988.